

Turbulence-Part 2

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Summary: Slingshot searches for the source of the Autobots' deception.

Turbulence-Part 2

"Prime! Bumblebee's ship; it's heading for Stratagamis!" Hound turned to Optimus, hoping for an answer.

Prime clenched Hound's chair. "Oh, no. Try communicating with them." Hound put through a message; waited an interim for a response.

"Sorry, Prime. I'm afraid..."

"They've figured it out," Prime finished. "Damn. Contact Stratagamis. Let them know...to expect company."

Hound opened a channel and turned the base's dish towards Stratagamis. "Secure frequency..." he began. A loud explosion cut him off. The channel fizzed and popped loudly as warning horns began to sound.

"Hound, what happened?!" Optimus demanded.

"I don't know," Hound yelled, waving his hands. "It just died!"

"Computer," Prime asked, "What just went wrong with the communications system?"

The base computer whirred for a few seconds. "Status," it bellowed. "Communications dish has been detached from footing. Estimated time of repair: 2 days with maximum crew."

"What?!" Hound exclaimed. "How did that happen?"

"Unknown," the computer answered.

Prime sat down next to Hound. "It's sabotage, my friend. Somebody wants Slag and Slingshot to learn the truth."

"Who?" Hound inquired.

"Does it matter? We can't reach them in time! Fate is in their own hands."

Hound was speechless. And far above them, hidden within the shadows of a bunker, Nightbeat grinned. His explosives had cut the communications dish clean. By the time his Autobot comrades would have it repaired, the great plan would reach fruition. Satisfied, he returned to patrol duty.

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>For a place of war, Stratagamis was awfully quiet. Slag, who had become distant in the last hour, grumbled, "No war here. Where is fighting?" <p>

Slingshot grimaced at the planet beneath them. At the nearest refueling station, the attendant told them of a battle waging above Stratagamis 9. Bad for business it was; they were his first customers this cycle. And now...?

"Nothing," stated Slingshot. Even if the battle was short-lived, there should be debris, patrol ships. There's nothing!"

"All lies," Slag growled, staring into oblivion.

"Yes..." Slingshot began, "Slag, are you okay?"

"I see things. Shapes."

Slingshot turned, worried. What if the hallucinations became worse for him? He didn't have time to think long, for a ship appeared on the monitor. Slingshot leapt.

"It's Fireflight!" Slingshot exclaimed. Then, his grin dropped. "He's not stopping!" Slingshot grabbed the controls and swung the shuttle out of his path.

"Fireflight is blind!"

"I've said so myself, Slag. However, he seemed to be preoccupied. I wonder..." Slingshot turned the craft till Fireflight was in view. On the run from him was the Decepticon jet, Thrust. "Well, look at that. Should we give him a hand?"

Slag absently nodded.

"Good...." Slingshot trailed Fireflight, who disappeared behind a moon. "Okay, brother, here comes the calvary!"

Slag gasped as they rounded the moon. Nothing was there; not even the

glimmer of Fireflight zooming away.

"They weren't going that fast," Slingshot said. Where the hell are they?!" Then, after thought, he smiled. "Oh, I'm an idiot. Why should I be surprised?"

"Huh?"

Slingshot turned to the Dinobot. "So far, we've been sent away from our teams on a faked salvage operation. Why should the battle here be any more real?"

"There is no battle? Then why we see Fireflight chase Thrust?"

"Slag, there is an Autobot station on Stratagamis. I'm willing to bet all my energon chips that there's something happening down there; something we're not meant to know. They carelessly broke up our fighting units. There never was a real battle, I think!"

Slag snorted. "You're good at guessing! But that is not proof!"

"Proof is what you want, is it?! Than you'll get it! Watch!" Slingshot flew the shuttle back to their old position. "This is where we first saw Fireflight. He almost hit us; didn't even acknowledge the presence of an Autobot shuttle. If my theory is correct, you'll see him again soon!"

"Bah!"

"Sit tight, Slag. Watch." In only a few minutes, Slingshot was proven correct.

"He's swung around the planet," Slag noted. "We talk to him now."

"Nope," Slingshot answered and piloted the ship directly at his brother.

"You play chicken?!" Slag hollered and grabbed Slingshot, trying to force the controls away from him.

"Darnit!" Slingshot grunted. He tried to wave Slag's hand away from his head, which was being shoved against the wall. "I'm trying to prove a point! Cut it out!"

"There's no point!" Slag growled. The Dinobot turned his face, just as Fireflight collided with them. He shielded his eyes with a free hand, but not enough to miss Fireflight shimmer and pass around them. "A hologram...", he stated.

"Yes, exactly my point," Slingshot muttered through Slag's fingers. "Now, will you please let go of my head?" Slag complied and Slingshot rubbed his neck.

"Why?" Slag was steamed.

"To make the locals think there's a battle being waged. They were holo-projections of Fireflight and Thrust. I'm guessing, hours ago,

there were more."

"So, we now discover the reason for deception." A statement, again.

"Yup," Slingshot agreed. "There is only one small base down there, but..."

"They hide many secrets in basement..."

For the first time in the whole affair, Slingshot smiled. "I would imagine..."

Autobase was only a dot on Stratagamis, but Slingshot had no problem finding a runway. The Autobots stood at the hatch, plotting.

"There's no way we weren't detected," Slingshot warned. "They'll welcome the shuttle, but first site of us, they'll flip. We either get in by force or evasion. Force is most likely." He tossed Slag a pistol. "Guns on stun."

"Think they know we're coming?"

Slingshot saw a blurred vision of Nightbeat, the thoughts that drifted through his mind. For reasons Slingshot did not understand, he said, "They don't."

"Ahhh..."

"And Slag, whatever crimes they've done against us, they're our comrades. Handle with care."

Slag sighed. "I'll pull punches."

"Good. You go first."

The Dinobot growled at him.

"Okay..." Slingshot exited first.

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>Tailgate stared at security monitor 5, which sat next to many others in his desk. "What the...I don't recall clearance for an Autobot shuttle to land." He squinted harder, trying to make out details of the fuzzy picture. "Let's see; the shuttle looks undamaged...They're not fresh from battle...And they've been kind to the shuttle. Humane." Tailgate's thoughts on the shuttle's care ceased when he saw who exited. He slammed a fist into the intercom. "Ironhide!!!!!"
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>Autobase Stratagamis was not impressive from the outside. Its bubbled domes resembled a civilian colony. However, it descended for stories underground. Official word was that Stratagamis was used for extensive ship repairs, but many heard the rumors it was much more; a haven for advanced research. Slingshot and Slag made a beeline for the base, though Slingshot still managed to point out a few sites.

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"Over there, Slag. See that tower? That's the holo-projector; a darn nice one too..."

"Very nice, but how do we plan on getting in building?"

"The main entrance, Slag. It will be, I imagine, the least guarded." Those plans faded, however. The main doors swung open and Ironhide burst forth, pistol drawn.

"They're on to us!" Slingshot dashed. Slag, however stood his ground. Ironhide was a respected warrior. He wouldn't...?

Ironhide zapped Slag. The Dinobot wavered, took a second blast, and collapsed.

"No!" Slingshot ran back to Slag; tried to help him up. While Slag was only stunned, the heavy Autobot was going nowhere. Slingshot faced the approaching assailant. "Ironhide! You fire on your own man, without warning! How deep is this?!"

Ironhide raised his gun, to quickly subdue Slingshot. The Aerialbot leapt, a useless gesture. He had let himself get too close! Ironhide pulled his trigger, just as Slag raised his own weapon and fired past Slingshot. The burst spun Ironhide around and his blast deflected off the shuttle. Knocked out, Ironhide hit the runway.

Slingshot grabbed Slag's arm. "He didn't even ask questions!"

Slag grunted. "I was careless."

"I don't blame you! Ironhide was a friend, I thought."

Slag's gun slipped out of his fingers. "He values something more right now...Something we should..be aware of..."

Slingshot fretted. "It awaits! Get up, Dinobot, before more come!"

Slag nodded. "I can't coordinate. Go; find out for me. I'll be along..." His eyes dimmed. Too late, Slingshot knew. Slag's systems had begun full shock repair. He wouldn't be walking for hours.

Slingshot glanced at the door. The other four Dinobots were heading their way. "Your brothers! What to do now?!" To the right were more shuttles. He could head there, but escape was not on the agenda. At left was assorted junk and the holo-projector. "The holo-projector!" Slingshot stood and glanced at the unconscious Slag. "We'll both know the truth, very soon." He sped towards the holograph-projector, plan in mind.

Grimlock, Dinobot commander, waved an arm at Swoop and Sludge. "You get Slingshot! Snarl and I carry in Slag and Ironhide!" He had commanded the Autobots once. That rule was gone, but the love of giving orders (and having them obeyed) did not. Swoop, a pterodactyl, pursued his charge. Sludge trudged after him.

Slingshot dove behind the projector. The others would be on him soon. Thankfully, though, he could put faith in the Dinobots' lack of intelligence. Slingshot frantically tapped at the projector's keyboard, hoping the pursuers had missed him disappear.

"Computer! Slingshot begged. "I'm in a bind!" Flashing on the monitor were graphical layouts of the holograms currently active; Fireflight and Thrust. "Computer," he ordered, "Access complete file on Autobot: Fireflight. Are schematics of robot form available?" The computer beeped an affirmative. "Good! Project Fireflight, robot mode, around me. Program to mimic my movements!"

Sludge, meanwhile, thrashed through strewn junk. "He's not hiding here!"

Swoop circled the area. "Wait, Sludge! I saw something move over there; by the projector!"

Slingshot gasped as the image of his brother formed around him. They were about the same size, so incongruencies were few. "Like a glove...", he muttered. The image of Fireflight was an energy field, projected onto Slingshot. While in the open, it could be maintained indefinitely. But if he moved inside the base, as he planned, the field would soon dissipate. Hopefully, he could get past most security before the disguise failed.

"It's Slingshot! Fire!" Swoop dove at the Aerialbot.

"Fool!" the Aerialbot screamed. "Look closer! I'm Fireflight! What are you doing?!"

Swoop paused, taking a closer look. Satisfied, he transformed. "Fireflight, sorry. Slingshot is loose on planet. He must be stopped from entering base."

"Of course," Slingshot lied, pretending he knew what in Cybertron Swoop was worried about. "If I see him, I'll take care of the matter. Now, do you mind if I finish with my duties?" Swoop saluted and ordered Sludge, still poking through garbage, to keep searching.

Slingshot sighed and peered out from the projector. The two Dinobots were moving on in their search. He smirked. "Never, ever, underestimate an Aerialbot." Briskly, but not to appear hurried, he headed for the main entrance.

Tailgate stood guard in the lobby. Slingshot snickered. Autobot bases were built for efficiency. Leave it to science compounds to have lobbies! As for Tailgate on guard? They were obviously undermanned.

"Hi, Tailgate." Slingshot waved and entered the elevator.

"Hello, Fireflight" said the petite Autobot, and went back to guarding the lobby. The elevator closed and proceeded into the depths of the base.

Tailgate glanced forlornly at the automatic front door, so often slammed. A pity. Tailgate strolled over to the door and patted it. "They just don't treat you right. At least Fireflight closed you softly. Fireflight..." He scratched his head, trying to remember. "Y'know, I don't recall him going outside." Worried, he once again hit the intercom.

"Perceptor, the funniest thing happened! Fireflight just passed by me and I have no recollection of him leaving before. The other exits are off limit, I thought. Well, maybe it's time I had a check-up..."

"_Fireflight just entered the building?_"

"Er, yeah." Tailgate sank.

"_Drat! It couldn't have been him! The real article is here with me! It's an impostor, Tailgate! Get him before he finds the lab!_"

"Um, okay." Tailgate headed for the elevator, then reconsidered. He really didn't want to take on the Aerialbot himself. Plus, he could shoot, miss, hit a poor door. Tailgate rushed to the main door and cupped his hands over his mouth.

"Dinobots! Get in here! Perceptor needs you to capture an impostor!"

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>Slingshot headed for the lowest floor. The base was huge and he didn't know what he was looking for, let alone _where_. However, something told him to start on the bottom floor. Something...dark. Slingshot was getting dizzy and braced the wall. "I'm being drawn," he gurgled, "to this level..."

The doors opened and Slingshot fell out. On this level, there was a presence; one that had a fix on him. He struggled to stand. Psychedelic visions began to pass before him. "The dreams..." he coughed, "They're worse here. It's what's been calling me all along!" Had he even been acting of his own volition?

"Whazzat?"

Slingshot looked around. The room was dark, full of greasy tools and the occasional glowing bulb. Kup, one of the Autobot's oldest warriors, was staring down at him.

"Fireflight, boy, what happened?!"

Slingshot let Kup help him up. He began to babble, unaware that it made no sense to the warrior. "It's here...The nightmares! I found them. They found me!" Before Kup could reply, the image of Fireflight

flickered.

"Hey..."

The hologram fizzled. "Wait a minute. Slingshot! Halt!" Kup charged the Aerialbot.

Slingshot backed away.

"Just stay put, lad, and I won't fire. We'll leave here and let things be."

The Aerialbot saw Kup's gun emerge and dashed for cover.

"Hey, come back here!"

Slingshot ran like a mad bull down aisles of tools, knocking over everything in his path. Whenever he would veer off to the left or right, to find a hiding place, the painful visions would grow in intensity. Grabbing his head, he ran straight towards a door. A question nagged his mind. Was the pain less because he was moving away from the source or going where it wanted him to?

Kup was almost on him. Slingshot tossed aside a large table, tripping the warrior. Kup spun around on the floor and fired, only to hit the door that Slingshot just slammed. Kup cursed.

Slingshot found a convenient lock under the inside handle and bolted the door up tight. Kup began to pound it, but the steel was too thick to break. Still, he would be through soon. Slingshot sensed an extremely cold draft finger his neck and turned.

He was in a freezer. Why would Autobots need refrigeration? That was a human practice, for edibles; unless the cold, stale air was needed to keep computer parts from degrading. Slingshot glanced at the walls. They were patterned, like made of bricks. But the squares weren't bricks, he realized. They were drawers. Slingshot gulped. "This is a morgue!" Each drawer must hold a slab, from which a dead Autobot's eyes looked out, waiting to be repaired. But some would never be. And what if an Autobot's mind was still active inside a dead husk? Did it forever live in there, screaming without a voice for freedom?

Slingshot, terrified, glanced back at the door. Kup was still beating on it. No, he couldn't go back that way. He had to hide. The only good spot, he realized, was in an empty drawer. He began scanning the drawers, trying not to note whose name was engraved on the handle. "An empty spot," he mumbled. "I'll find an empty spot and hide until it's safe to emerge."

Then, on the bottom level of drawers, Slingshot was gripped with horror. For the tag on one of the drawers read his own name.

"Slingshot...No, unless they're planning for me to go." He turned away, but a whisper beckoned him to look, just take a peek. Slingshot turned back to the drawer. It sat menacingly. It seemed to crack open on its own. He grasped the handle, intent on slamming the drawer shut. No, he was compelled, begged to open it. Slowly, he did.

Dead eyes met his. He didn't recognize them, but he did. The dead torso inside was ripped of limbs and metal flesh. But a glint in the corpse's gritted teeth, a shine in it's eyes, drew in Slingshot's mind. The Aerialbot saw what they had seen: an onrush of living darkness, the first, second and hundredth bite of teeth that ate him alive, a final vision on cheering comrades who survived and the realization that he did not. Then, nothing.

Slingshot screamed, echoing the death holler of the body before him. He rose, tried to flee, but the remainder of the corpse's arms snatched his chest and pulled him back. He did a sickly dance of death with the body before it fell. Slingshot dropped beside it. No, it was dead. His imagination was acting up; the visions were taking further hold. But the name on the drawer...Slingshot looked closer at the face. It was ripped of features but the basic structure was familiar. Familiar, he realized, like a reflection. For a second, he saw his own face, contorted in pain, on the body before him.

"It's me," Slingshot muttered, backing across the room. Kup still banged on the door, creating a tribal chorus that had echoed during his whole time in the morgue. "I didn't survive." He backed into a Dinobot. Grimlock and his troops, Slag excluded, were standing in a doorway. Slingshot had not noticed the exit before.

"You come with us," ordered Grimlock. Slingshot saw their blasters, aimed at his chest. There was no chance he could defeat or escape from them. Frankly, he didn't even care. He was already dead, wasn't he? Slingshot dropped his gun and led the way towards whatever fate awaited him.

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